

Is Buddhism a religion, a philosophy, or what?

by Piya Tan

There was a time over a generation ago when scholars generally defined “religion” as some kind of system or teaching that “believes in God or godliness.” But Buddhism does not emphasize this aspect even though Buddhism, like Brahmanism and Hinduism, does have stories about Brahma (God) and the gods.

Buddhism teaches that we can and must make our own effort in spiritual liberation. Indeed, who else can help us if we do not help ourselves?

So is Buddhism a religion? If we define religion as dependence on some *external* source of liberation, Buddhism is a religion for those who have faith that the Buddha can liberate them by, say, being reborn in Pure Land.

But those who follow the early teachings of Buddhism generally regard mind-training, especially through meditation, as the “direct way” to personal liberation. We could say that they regard Buddhism as a “spiritual system.”

Some such people who are very committed to Buddhist practice, for example, they meditate everyday, keep to a diet that does not harm living beings, support themselves with right livelihood, and take pains to keep to the five precepts, Buddhism is definitely a “way of life.”

Then there are scholars who mostly study Buddhism according to their special field of expertise. It is a bit more complicated here. The anthropologists, for example, might regard Buddhism as some kind of “belief-system.” The sociologists are more interested in Buddhism as a “social system,” how it functions in society, more than anything else. Then there are the Buddhologists, who mostly examine the Buddhist texts, and try to reconstruct some sort of “historical Buddhism,” or at least, a “textual Buddhism.”

There are again specialists and enthusiasts who are interested mainly in Buddhist architecture, Buddhist music, Buddhist magic, Buddhist literature, Buddhist economics, Buddhist politics, or Buddhist psychology. As such, Buddhism can be all things to all men.

For the growing number of non-Buddhists who meditate or are attracted to Buddhist teachings, they know it as inner stillness.

The most convenient way of looking at Buddhism, as in the case of other world religions, with so many facets, perspectives and realities, is to take it as a “civilization,” or even more broadly, a “system.”

On a practical level, Buddhism is about being truly happy, that is, keeping our bodies healthy and useful by way of the five precepts, and to be truly mentally happy through a calm, clear and ready mind, and to really enjoy the company of others, getting to really know them and to bring them lasting happiness and true wisdom.

It’s useful also to know what Buddhism is NOT.

Buddhism is not about chanting so many hundreds, thousands or millions of this or that chant, or performing some powerful ritual. This is likely to increase a false self-confidence, or even conceit, that I

have done “more” than others. It is about learning to keep the mind calm and clear so that we understand its true nature.

Buddhism is not found in large colourful buildings with walls hiding TV, expensive electronics, hotel comfort, money, and charisma. It is about how we reach out to others with lovingkindness through our actions, speech and minds.

Buddhism is not about speaking in riddles, punctuated by grunts and shouts, nor about whether a dog has Buddha-nature or not. It is to directly look into ourselves, our minds, seeing the problem, its roots, and dealing with them directly.

Buddhism is not about relics (are they real in the first place?). The true relics are the Buddhist suttas and teachings that bring us true joy and inner stillness. Buddhism is like good seeds that we plant and grow as healthy food that nourishes us so that we can turn to our real tasks of life.

Buddhism is not about monastics who do not keep to their vows or who lead false lives. We should never contribute to their failure to keep to the monastic rules. As lay Buddhists, we must constantly remind them to keep the precepts, study, practise and realize the Dharma. For, we get the kind of Buddhism we deserve.

Buddhism is a readiness to help others wisely and effectively when the occasion arises. When we are unable to do so, we should examine deep inside why: is it selfishness, fear, hate, ignorance? Then, we try again and again until we know we have rid of that negative quality.

Buddhism is about self-knowledge. It is like when we were children with fear of the dark and loneliness, clinging to a parental figure. As we finish schooling, we become emotionally stronger with knowing. True education is about emotional independence: our happiness is not dependent on things on earth or in heaven, or anywhere else. The truth is in here, not out there.

Buddhism is definitely not tricking people into signing a policy, after which they are trapped by the fine print of dogma.

Buddhism is about questioning ourselves: how do I FEEL when reading this? WHY do I feel like this? Go on asking, and you will in due course discover that you are your best teacher.

When you stop thinking and questioning, others will think for you!

For the true practitioner, Buddhism is “emptiness.”

For the Buddhist saint, it is true liberation.

For the Buddha, perhaps he would say, “What Buddhism? Never heard of it!”

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“Imagine the Past 2000 Years without Religion”

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=5VyA6HSA4ZM&feature=related>